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Cities and Urban Spaces: Chances for Cultural and Citizenship Education

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Input

Workshop II
Performing Arts and Culture in the City:
New Fields of Action for Cultural and Citizenship Education

by Gabriele Klein
University of Hamburg (Germany)

The city as a stage.
Urban cultures, cultural performances and the performing arts

In the next 20 minutes I would like to outline some ideas for cultural and citizenship education (let me say for cities: intercultural citizenship education) coming from the contemporary performing arts.

I would like to adopt the following perspective: By giving an example from performance art, I will demonstrate how contemporary performance art creates experimental social and political fields for cultural and citizenship education. My goal is to demonstrate that cultural and citizenship education should not only be cognitive learning (like political education) or learning how to communicate. I would like to stress the idea, that cultural and citizenship education should also focus on:

1. The idea, that the experience of cultural difference in everyday practices is based on the aesthetic perception of the other or of the culture, which is already inscribed in the public sphere.
2. The cultural and citizenship education is also an education of the corporeality of the other or the corporeal interaction with the others.
3. And at least that cultural and citizenship education is to find a strategy to organise the one life in, around or against the social and political order in the urban space, which I basically understand as a choreographic order.

I. Performance Art in the Public Space

Video: LIGNA/ Radioballett

One day in May 2002 some people appeared in Hamburg's main Station, listening to radios. They suddenly stopped at the same time and then began performing the same movements: the hand open, the arm outstretched, they turned the hand to be vertical, they danced as if they were clubbing... Ligna broadcast choreographic instructions on the frequency of an independent radio station called FSK (Freies Sender Kombinat), which each of the radio listeners followed individually in their places. The movements were a mimicry of actions like begging, which are prohibited according to station regulations. Thereby they referred to the privatisation of the train station as a formerly public space, which was now patrolled by some security agencies, the German border police and the Hamburg state police. According to Ligna, this "Radioballet" was meant to create an alternative public, that sidestepped the ban of political assembly effectively in the train station, but still – in a different form compared to usual protest or demonstration – it demonstrated the link between art and politics.

What we see here is a performance in urban space. Everyone involved is both at the same time, audience and performer; everyone is acting something out for the others. This piece by Ligna, which was repeated in Leipzig, Munich, Vienna (Heldenplatz) and Berlin (Pariser Platz, in front of the Brandenburger Tor), is an example of the great variety of performing art projects in public space, which are very common in many cities at the moment. Public space becomes the stage; the city is brought into focus as urban theatre. It is a learning of the theatricalized society.

Let me say some words about my understanding of performance: Performance is an artistic practice that operates in a non-linear and discordant fashion. It is non-representational and interpretative. It is a theatrical practice that creates spaces by defining them as theatrical in and through the performance itself. It is therefore not surprising that performance art has defined itself since its beginnings in the 1960s as an artistic practice beyond the classical framework of the theatre and sought out sites in the public sphere. These aspects permit the transformation of the conventions of the bourgeois theatre, whether it is the proscenium stage or the central perspective, the relationship of actors and audience or (that) of text and interpretation. This performative practice resembles the *dérive*: in the same way the "city" creates itself as a space of perception and experience only out of the movement of drifting through it. It is also the "piece" recreating a new one in every run-through. Performances in public space and aesthetic interventions encroach on the conventional order of urban space by un-settling and transforming established perceptions of space and providing new possibilities of experiencing the city.

In contrast to visual arts, the field of performance art – having emerged from contemporary dance – has a different focus. Choreography as performance developed via dance concepts, which aesthetically reworked everyday movements and gestures in everyday spaces. The reflection of quotidian physical language in choreographic means is a very elaborate form of – what I call – social choreography.

The artistic and cultural preoccupation with the city becomes more important in a phase of urban history in which a radical shift into the post-industrial age is occurring: suburbanization, "peripherisation", deindustrialisation, shrinking cities, segregation and new forms of exclusion are the centre of the current socio-economic discourse on the post-Fordian city; eventisation, musealisation, festivalisation, Disneyfication and McDonaldisation are the keywords propelling neo-liberal, communal and cultural politics in the global rat race. In the context of this shift in the city structure, the interventions of art are not only (of) aesthetic, but of particular social and political relevance.

II. Everyday Cultural Performances

Not only public art, happenings or pop art produce social choreographies, but also pop culture – like punk, hip-hop and techno – can be described as an aesthetic expression of the urban experience of social change. Woodstock, Love Parades, Street Battles are examples thereof. These cultural performances deal with urban experience – especially with the experience of diversity – and by their soundscapes, texts and signs (graffiti, urban fashion in punk), they produce images of local urbanity.

What is the difference to performances as artistic practices?

And what is the difference to the performances, which became as media events an integral element of new urban politics in the theatricalized city – like for example Olympic Games or Football World Championships, runners marathon or skaters meeting, techno parades or break-dance battles, Christopher Street Day or Carnival of Cultures, pop concert or Church Day?

And at least: What differentiates artistic performances in urban space from everyday cultural performances in the theatricalized public spaces of the post-industrial city? The everyday practices can be seen as physical embodiments of the theatricalized, neo-liberal subject, which is forced not only to act but also to always present its actions – that means to perform: joggers, skateboarders, inline skaters, beach volleyball players, cross-country skiers, mountain bikers, sport climbers, snowboarders, skiers or bungee jumpers. All have left their traditional spaces of movement and have turned away from their natural habitats to the cities, once seen the epitome of technology, functionality and civilization. In the post-industrial city, natural habitats are created as event locations and produce new forms of using the urban space: whether artificial climbing walls or ski slopes, whether cross-country ski-tracks or city beach clubs with beach volleyball fields, outdoor sports have become transformed into everyday after-work city leisure activities, in which nature itself is simulated: sports culture in the simulated natural environment of the urban theatre.

III. Aesthetic intervention and cultural and citizenship education

When cultural performances are staged as media events, conceived as profit oriented entertainment and designed as show; when interventions in urban space are already big business and even artistic happenings in the cityscape have become part of local image politics, then art in the public sphere must face new demands. In comparison to the 1960's, performative interventions are confronted with the socio-spatial ubiquity of the theatrical today. Considering the dis-placement and dis-settlement of social order, cultural conventions and signs, the political and aesthetic provocation, the search for utopias, for heterotopic spaces: From whatever perspective one should wish to illuminate the motives, methods and effects of performance art, it is today clearly called upon to find an aesthetic strategy. This strategy must reveal the ever more subtle boundaries between play and gravity, illusion and reality, the imaginary and the real and to show itself as the other, the un-settling in the theatrical space of the post-industrial city. By defining aesthetic practice in and as a social process, by dispensing with scripts and character roles, by not just playing but staging a "serious game" – which doesn't act "as if", but is instead real, non-recurrent, and immanent – performance art is a different vehicle of knowledge production – also about urban space. It is a reference to the body and a movement based on personal experience and on the participation of the audience.

In contrast to post-traditional urban events, which – like football matches or pop concerts – are also created as momentary communities and as events. Artistic performances create a sensual framework in which the instrumentalisation of the theatrical in the city can be reflected. This is where the political potential of artistic performance lies (can lie): By utilizing a methodological and procedural approach, integrating “experts of the everyday” (like LIGNA) and applying the theatricality of presence and live performance, artistic performances create a space in which the “city” is not only imagined and presented, but alternative urban life also can be tested and experienced.

In this politics of the aesthetic lies the social explosive power of those artistic practices that dissolve boundaries by resurveying spaces and producing new ones, symbolically occupying and reinterpreting existing sites. They produce new spatial concepts that – obtained through subjective and subversive strategies and charged with memory and experience – create a cultural testimony of urban space that is inevitably political.

From this perspective aesthetic participation of urban consumers in artistic productions and in citizenship education cannot be described as two separate discourses or social fields, as auto poetic systems with their own rules, norms and values. With reference to the philosopher Jacques Rancière they can be seen as two forms of the “division of the sensual”. According to this, performance art and politics would be interwoven strategies of a “politics of the kinaesthetic” and a “kinaesthetic policy”. Consequently, citizenship education is less to be understood as an institutional strategy or as a field subsidised by politics in contrast to art – which is seen as a pure aesthetic practice or an impulse for cultural education. Rather the political is here formulated normatively and focused on one aspect: political activity, according to Rancière is “something that removes a body from its natural place or the place that is naturally assigned to it, which makes visible what should not have been seen, and which makes comprehensible as speech something that would normally be considered noise”.¹

According to this concept, aesthetics is not to be described as art theory and aesthetic not just as a form of perception. Rather aesthetic is inscribed in political practices – and indeed because these practices themselves with their norms, rules and habits already guide sensual perception in as much as they locate people socially, ascribe social and political space for them and in this way regulate social perception. Precisely there the political dimensions of the physic-sensual and the movement perceptions can be identified. That is the dimension of – what I call – “kinaesthetic politics”: as political activity is understood as the sensual practice of making visible and shifting cultural and social codes especially in the public sphere – and indeed in a way that they contradict the “police order” as Rancière calls it.

Intervention in the “police order” of art, in the cultural and educational policy fabric, is an important and indispensable step. These aesthetic forms of interventions are, in my argument, political and as much part of political and cultural education, when the aesthetic practice grates against the regulations, the norms, habits and conventions – and not only grates against them but also changes them. In other words: They are political when they produce a critical difference to the “kinaesthetic reality of the modern age”;² this also takes place through a critical theory and practice of gender, of the body (and the cultural and gendered body concepts), of classes and of post-colonial politics. And finally they are political when they exist not only as functional networks but develop a community sense. It is a sense of community that does not declare community as an objective, but assumes it is a precondition in the practices themselves. In other words: Citizenship education as concrete sensuous activity requires the creation of collective identities – and these

¹ Jacques Rancière, *Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen*, foreword by Maria Muhle. Berlin, 2006, p. 9

² Sloterdijk, *Euroaioismus*, p. 25



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can not be created solely neither through transient and non-binding networks and their policies nor through a rationalised political education.

Choreographic learning in performing art projects (like LIGNA) – as part of an implicit learning and a special, corporeal form of scenic learning – can be a medium for training physical-sensual perception. But it is much more: it is a core field of the political, where, with the questioning of its central categories, such as rhythm, force, space, time, energy, dynamics and flow, it sheds light on the kinetic foundations of modern city.